FROM STATELESS TO U.S. CITIZEN: ONE ROHINGYA REFUGEE’S JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

Mohammed Anas was only 15 years old when he left his home in Burma.

At first, Mohammed’s mother refused to let him go. The journey by sea to Malaysia was both long and dangerous. But knowing the persecution he would surely face at the hands of the Burmese military and police as a young Rohingya man, she finally relented. She knew all too well how the Buddhist majority in Burma felt about the mostly Muslim minority, having watched them burn Rohingya villages, force people into labor, and severely limit their access to medical care or education. She had witnessed thousands of Rohingya flee the country to find safety elsewhere.

Mohammed traveled by foot to Bangladesh, where he paid smugglers to take him to Malaysia in a boat with 95 others. The journey was supposed to take 7 days, so they took enough food and water to last one week.

After 7 days, they were lost at sea. To make matters worse, the boat had a leak, so they had to continuously bail buckets of water to keep the ship afloat.

“On day 10, the boat’s engine broke, leaving us stranded in the ocean,” said Mohammed. “As the days passed, people grew very weak from lack of food and water.”

At several points, other ships came within sight of their boat, but none of them came close enough to help. When another ship appeared in the distance on the 25th day, some people began jumping in the water to swim towards it. When the boat didn’t come to rescue them, 20 people drowned in the ocean, too weak to keep themselves afloat.

“All I could do is pray and pray that we would survive,” he said.

Finally, a fishing boat from Sri Lanka rescued them on the 28th day. They were taken to Sri Lanka and informed they would have to return to Burma. At that time, there was no democracy in Burma—just a brutal military regime.

“We told the U.N. representatives that we would rather die now than return to our deaths in Burma,” said Mohammed. “My country is very beautiful, but the government is not. They have such hate. Here in the U.S., the government saves lives. But there, the government takes them.”

With no option to safely return home, the U.N. provided shelter to Mohammed and the other survivors in Sri Lanka for 4 years and helped him complete the application process for resettlement. During that time, the U.N. also provided them with a teacher, so Mohammed began studying English before he

“Although my journey has been difficult, I’m grateful for those who helped me along the way. I love this great country and this great country’s people.”

– Mohammed Anas, resettled by RefugeeOne
February 2012

Continued on page 2...
even came to the United States.

Learning English can be particularly challenging for Rohingya refugees, as their native language is only spoken and has no written form. But Mohammed was determined to learn—starting with learning to write his name.

“I was so excited when I found out I would be coming to this great country,” Mohammed said of the day he learned he would be resettled in the U.S. “I was finally given a life of freedom and safety.”

When Mohammed’s plane touched ground at O’Hare, RefugeeOne was there to welcome him and take him to his first apartment. Over the next 6 months, Mohammed quickly excelled through 2 levels of English at RefugeeOne before staff helped him enroll in more advanced classes at Truman College.

With the help of RefugeeOne’s workforce development team, Mohammed found a job working at Tocco, an Italian restaurant in O’Hare Airport’s international terminal. He continued to practice his English with coworkers and by offering water to customers as he bussed tables.

Eventually, as his English improved, Mohammed was promoted from dishwasher to busser and later to host. Today, he is proud to be a server at Frontera Grill (managed by the same company as Tocco), his third promotion in just 4 years.

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“Of all my accomplishments, this is one that I am the most proud of. For the first time in my life, I am recognized as a citizen. Now I am saving to help my wife in Bangladesh, who is expecting our first child, come to this great country to join me.”

DID YOU KNOW?

- Burma or Myanmar? In 1989, the ruling military junta changed the country’s name from Burma, its colonized name, to Myanmar. The U.S. and much of the rest of the world do not recognize the name Myanmar because of its oppressive implications for the people of Burma.
- Although the Rohingya, an ethnic and religious minority group, trace their presence in Burma back centuries, most Burmese consider them illegal immigrants. The government stripped them of their citizenship in 1982.
- Human rights groups have documented the country’s history of human rights violations against the Rohingya, including forced labor, rape, burning villages, and religious suppression. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights calls it a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”
- Since August 2017, more than 650,000 Rohingya have fled.
- Chicago is home to one of the largest Rohingya communities in the U.S., with more than 350 families, or roughly 1,500 individuals.

TAKE ACTION TO HELP THE ROHINGYA

In early February, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act (S.2060). This bipartisan legislation is a critical step toward demanding accountability for the ethnic cleansing taking place in Burma. Contact your Senators today to demand a swift passage of S.2060 by calling (202) 224-3121.
Shortly after moving to Chicago in 2015, Elyse Brendlen learned that Illinois was among 30 states attempting to refuse the resettlement of Syrian refugees. Her immediate reaction was to find a way to show her support for those fleeing violence across the globe.

“I learned about RefugeeOne from an article in the local news,” she said, “and I knew I wanted to help.”

After reading about RefugeeOne’s co-sponsorship program online, Elyse decided to organize a group to welcome and co-sponsor a refugee family. In addition to raising funds to support a newly-arrived family, co-sponsors provide friendship and help to refugees as they acclimate to their new lives during their first 6 months.

Elyse began recruiting people to join her co-sponsorship team on Facebook. She created a Google form explaining what she wanted to do and encouraging people to join her efforts. The response was overwhelming—so many people signed up to help that she had to close the form the next day.

“We ended up with a really cool mix of people of different ages, professions, and neighborhoods who came together to do this,” said Elyse. “We call ourselves Home Sweet Home Chicago.”

One day in February 2017, Elyse was contacted by a staff member at RefugeeOne asking if her team would welcome a Rohingya family of 3—soon to be 4—who was arriving in Chicago the next day. Eager to get to work, they immediately agreed and sprang into action setting up the apartment RefugeeOne had secured.

“As soon as they stepped off the plane, Yunus, Royedah and their son Anas were greeted by their co-sponsors, who visited them weekly, helping them practice English and explore all their new home has to offer.”

The next day, team members were at O’Hare to welcome Yunus, his pregnant wife Royedah, and their 2-year-old son Anas. One of the team members brought their toddler, who quickly befriended the couple’s young son.

Upon arrival, Yunus was determined to learn English. He enrolled in classes at RefugeeOne and began looking for employment. Within a few months, he was thrilled to find a full-time job working second shift as a packer at a local manufacturer.

“I was so impressed by his eagerness to learn,” said Elyse. “I remember driving him to an appointment and every time we stopped at a red light, I could hear him trying to form the words on the street signs under his breath.”

Thanks to his dedication, Yunus soon found a new job at Tyson that came with a raise, benefits, and a switch to first shift, a welcome change in schedule for Royedah, who was quickly approaching her due date. The night she went into labor, she had Yunus call their co-sponsors who promptly called an ambulance. The day she was released from the hospital, they were there again to take her home.

Elyse and the other members of her team continued visiting the family weekly as they adjusted to their new home. With time, the family became more independent, relying on their co-sponsors’ assistance less and less.

“This is some of the most important work I’ve ever done,” said Elyse. “I realized that they were truly becoming self-reliant when they found a new apartment and arranged for movers on their own. It was a powerful sign of their strength and how much they accomplished in less than one year.”

YOU’RE INVITED...

Join us to learn about the origins and impacts of the Rohingya refugee crisis, hear from a refugee resettled by RefugeeOne, taste some authentic Rohingya food, and find out how you can help the Rohingya here and abroad through activism and volunteering. More info at refugeeone.org/rohingya.

Wednesday, March 14  |  Episcopal Diocese of Chicago
Reception: 6:00 p.m.  |  Program: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.

CHICAGO’S FIRST BURMESE RESTAURANT

Chicago has become home to a growing number of Rohingya refugees, including one family who recently opened the city’s first and only Burmese restaurant, The Family House. Located at 2305 W. Devon Ave, their menu features traditional Rohingya and Burmese dishes, from the country’s famous tea leaf salad to its briny Mohinga stew. Delicious!
Dear friends,

For a people who have suffered so much, it’s remarkable how caring and hardworking our new Rohingya neighbors are.

Mohammed (featured in our cover article) is a prime example of the Rohingya refugees we’ve had the privilege of welcoming to Chicago. He and his family are part of the world’s fastest developing refugee crisis as Rohingyas flee ethnic cleansing in Burma.

In the 5 years since we welcomed him here at age 20, Mohammed has studied and learned English, maintained full-time employment at O’Hare Airport, and been promoted 3 times! But his proudest accomplishment? Becoming a U.S. citizen last summer.

More than all that, I have reason to believe he’d give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. Like all the Rohingyas people we work with, Mohammed goes out of his way to help others who are struggling.

How can you help Rohingya refugees? Three ways: Join us on March 14 to educate yourself (page 3). Take action by calling your U.S. Senator (page 2). And consider volunteering like Elyse Brendlen and her friends who cosponsored a Rohingya refugee family (page 3).

Together, we can build a world with less suffering and strong communities to help refugees heal and thrive. Thanks for being part of it.

— Melineh Kano

David fled war in Liberia at age 7. He arrived in the U.S. at 11, having completed only the first grade.

This May, he’s graduating from Purdue University with an engineering job awaiting him in Chicago.

Join us to hear David share his story and to meet more young refugees with amazing futures ahead.